Poland's higher education reforms: power grab or necessary adjustment?

Poland's authoritarian government is routinely compared to its widely criticised counterpart in Hungary, and its university reforms sparked a wave of protest by students and academics fearful of political interference. But, one year on, are those concerns being realised? David Matthews travels to Warsaw to find out.

August 15, 2019
By David Matthews

When the rise of populism and authoritarianism in Europe is discussed, Hungary is inevitably Exhibit A. That is as true in academic circles as elsewhere. The country's notoriety has been earned by a series of apparent moves by Viktor Orbán's government to impose its values on the academy, including banning gender studies, forcing George Soros' Central European University to relocate to Vienna and foisting powerful Orbán-appointed chancellors on the rest of the sector.

But mention of Hungary is often followed closely in popular discourse by mention of its fellow ex-communist near-neighbour, Poland. The latter also has an authoritarian right-wing government, led by the Law and Justice Party, which is in conflict with the European Union over what observers see as transgressions on the independence of the judiciary. Perhaps, then, it was not a surprise when the Polish government's announcement of a string of radical university reforms led to the largest student protests in the country since the fall of communism last summer.

The students – in tandem with many academics – occupied universities across Poland, draping campuses in banners that demanded "sovereign academia", and proclaimed: "We won't give up our autonomy".

They objected to the government's aspiration to break the power of departmental heads, establish financial control by rectors and, most controversially, create external councils to drive institutional strategies – which the protesters feared could become a beachhead for the imposition of political control.

However, a year on from the reforms' narrow passage through Poland's parliament, are those fears playing out? Is the Polish state really seeking to impose its political prejudices and priorities on the sector? Or is it just trying to empower Polish rectors to manage their institutions more successfully and impose a much-needed dose of ambition and meritocracy on a languishing higher education system that punches far below its weight on the international stage?

The architect of Poland's shake-up is Jarosław Gowin, an urbane, silver-haired philosopher with an eclectic CV. A member of the Solidarity movement during the communist period, he went on to lead a "flying university" – a roving series of open lectures – before, in 2003, co-founding and leading the vocational Tischner European University in Kraków.

Since then, as leader of his own Agreement Party, Gowin has carved out a position as something of a conservative kingmaker in Polish politics. He served as justice minister in the country's previous conservative government, under Donald Tusk, before entering coalition with Law and Justice and becoming both minister of science and higher education and deputy prime minister.

Welcoming *Times Higher Education* to his office on a sweltering Warsaw day, Gowin, via his interpreters, explains his reforms with reference to a conversation he once had with Sir Leszek Borysiewicz, the former vice-chancellor of the University of Cambridge, who is the son of Polish wartime refugees.

"We simply compared the powers he had as vice-chancellor and the powers of rectors in Polish universities," says Gowin, who attended Cambridge as a young man. And although Cambridge is among the least centralised universities in the UK, Borysiewicz's view was that the Polish system "cannot work" because the hands of its rectors are tied to such an extent "that they simply cannot…manage the universities properly", Gowin recalls. By contrast, Borysiewicz tells *THE*, UK vice-chancellors have "a great degree of freedom" to find solutions to institutional challenges – even if they still "cannot run counter to the academic community".

Gowin's reforms end a system in which money often bypassed rectors and went straight to academic departments: a level of internal autonomy unheard of in many western European countries. The reforms also mean that, from now on, it will be the centralised universities, not their departmental parts, that award degrees. Universities need to work as "one body", instead of being a series of "loosely connected units", Gowin stresses.

But the minister is also concerned to make sure that the right sort of people become rectors, in a system that still largely selects incumbents via a ballot of academics. He warns that good researchers do not necessarily make good managers and argues that external supervision of rectors is essential to preventing universities from turning inwards and becoming "ivory towers".

To this end, his reforms also include the creation of university councils. Highly controversially, these were initially envisaged as a body mainly of outsiders, and would have had exclusive power to stipulate institutional strategy and put forward candidates for rectoral elections. However, following the protests, the councils' role has been downgraded, such that they will now only offer advice on strategy, and will share responsibility for nominating rectoral candidates with other bodies, such as academic senates.

Despite the protests, there is consensus that Polish universities need to change. One issue is efficiency. Waldemar Siwinski, president of the Perspektywy Education Foundation, a higher education thinktank, has written that "it is not uncommon for the same discipline to be

taught or researched in three or even five different units of the same university"; he sees this as a case of "wasted money and resources".

Moreover, Polish universities are accused from all sides of the political spectrum of having a "feudal" ethos, operating on the basis of favours and connections, rather than being open to talent, explains Monika Helak, a sociology PhD student at the University of Warsaw and vice-president of the Polish Humanities Crisis Committee, which protested against the Gowin reforms. "The story was that, at a Polish university, nothing is possible if you haven't got connection with deans," she tells *THE*, over coffee in a central Warsaw cafe. And some on the Polish left have lent Gowin their support, in the hope that giving more power to rectors and less to deans will turn Polish universities into the meritocratic institutions perceived to exist in western Europe, Helak says.

Her own preferred solution, however, is the opposite: "more power to the bottom". For instance, Helak would give all students and PhD candidates a vote over the promotion and hiring of professors. "Why not?" she asks. "They should also have a say if we think they are members of the community." A broader electorate also lessens the risk of nepotism and horse-trading as there are more voters to convince, making a stitch-up harder to arrange, she thinks.

A similar view is expressed by Monika Kostera, a management and organisation professor at Jagiellonian University in Poland and Södertörn University in Sweden. She notes that Polish universities have traditionally enjoyed a degree of academic self-governance long since extinguished in western Europe, and she laments that the Gowin reforms have shut down potentially "glorious" experiments in "collegial democracy". She also claims that they swim against a tide that, in Sweden, has seen a flowering of newbooks and projects over the past few years looking at how universities can move away from top-down management. She is concerned that Polish universities now have to "jump into an...Anglo-Saxon system – without the funds".

Critics are also wary of Poland's adoption of a version of Germany's Excellence Strategy, whereby Polish universities are being asked to compete for the status of a "research university", with more money promised to the winners. The result will be that "the smaller and younger universities on the borders of the country...will suffer", according to Jaroslaw Pluciennik, a humanities professor at the University of Łódź.

If such institutions fail to do well in subject-level evaluations, held every four years, they could also lose the right to award doctoral degrees for that field, according to Emanuel Kulczycki, policy adviser to the ministry and head of a science communication research group at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. The result, according to Helak, could be an internal brain drain, from increasingly squeezed, teaching-focused universities in the country's regions to the big cities of Warsaw, Kraków and Poznań.

To counterbalance these concerns, newly designated "regional" universities will get a funding pot of their own, says Gowin. And, at most, the losers in the new system can only have their budgets cut by 1 per cent a year, to prevent too great a shock. But, Gowin chides,

these “weaker” universities should “strive for excellence” and not just stay at an “average” level.

In all cases, Gowin says, the key to excellence is not so much the organisational and funding arrangements as “the attitudes of the academics”. Supporters of reform claim that, for too long, Polish academics have been happy to publish in Polish-language journals, rather than engaging in the global academic conversation. “It's funny because our government is very often accused of being nationalistic,” says Gowin. “On the contrary, my critics accuse me of being internationalistic.”

Poland’s underperformance on research isn’t hard to document. Out of 4,257 starting grants awarded by the prestigious European Research Council to junior researchers since 2007, academics based in Poland have won only 22. And of 2,899 advanced grantsawarded to senior researchers since 2008, Poland has won just four. Meanwhile, its two highest-ranked universities in *THE*’s World University Rankings are in the 601-800 bracket.

Kulczycki believes that the older generation of Polish academics “don't want to face international peer review”. In too many fields, researchers can make their careers simply by publishing in local journals, he tells *THE,* in a hotel bar near the ministry. “It's an environment in which they can survive, and, of course, they are kings of this land.”

In addition, the old system rewarded academics for producing books regardless of where they were published. This led one researcher to publish 53 monographs in a four-year period, Kulczycki recounts. Nor was that individual short of publishing options; Kulczycki estimates that large universities have about 40 in-house publishing houses, all churning out books by their own academics in pursuit of the government funding that comes with them via a funding formula to which volume of publication constitutes one of several inputs. He likens such articles and books to the Soviet roubles that once circulated in many countries behind the Iron Curtain – valuable internally, but “worthless” in the wider world.

In response, Gowin has instituted a new research assessment regime, to which Polish researchers can submit a maximum of only four papers over each four-year evaluation period – with an average of three being the expected rate. These will be assessed on the basis of what Kulczycki calls “bibliometrics informed by expert judgement”. Bibliometrics, in this case, means rating papers according to where they were published. Panels of subject experts will draw up rankings of journals based on, for example, their impact factor or Eigenfactor, but then adjust the ratings if these bibliometric measures are deemed not to fully capture a particular journal’s quality.

The overall thrust is to reward departments whose academics are publishing in “renowned” English-language journals with an international readership, Kulczycki says. This is because publishing “in Polish about very local issues” means that Polish perspectives are not heard internationally. For example, the fall of communism has become symbolised by the fall of the Berlin Wall, overlooking Poland’s arguably far more decisive Solidarity movement, he says.

“It’s our fault that we didn't communicate it properly,” Kulczycki says. And while “Polish scholars think that no one will care about the history of a small [Polish] village”, he suggests that making such work internationally interesting could be as simple as incorporating a comparison with a German counterpart.

However, the fear among critics of the reforms in the humanities and the social sciences is that this push towards globally focused work in English – using American or British rather than Polish case studies, say – will force them to write articles that are meaningless to Polish society.

“When you are a humanist or a social scientist you need to keep in touch with your own local community, otherwise you will become completely alienated – as is the case in many other countries,” says Jagiellonian’s Kostera. And when societies no longer care about social sciences, “they don't want to fund [them]”, she warns.

The new evaluation system for research had been due to begin in 2017, but that timetable was another sacrifice arising from last year’s protests; it will begin this year instead. Gowin regrets the need for such concessions: “Certainly I wanted the reforms to be deeper and more courageous,” he admits. But, in the face of resistance, the ministry had to take “one step back”.

In reality, many rectors have also declined to use their newfound control of finances to shake up departmental budgets. This is because they need to maintain their internal support to be re-elected.

“You have the same people, within the same universities, and they want to have exactly the same situation as before,” Kulczycki laments. The “lion’s share” of universities have stuck to the old system, he says, with academics still electing their deans and rectors.

Given the Hungarian situation, as well as memories of the communist-era grip of politicians over academia, Kulczycki understands “why the academic community is afraid” of the reforms. However, following the concessions, he argues – regretfully – that the new university councils “have no power at all”. Moreover, politicians are explicitly barred from sitting on them: “We were very particular in the law in guaranteeing that politicians have no influence,” Gowin says.

As for who does sit on them, academics have a considerable say in this, too. For instance, a battle over council membership recently played out at the University of Warsaw, where it took three votes by the senate to approve the required six new members, explains Piotr Drygas, a senate student representative. Five candidates – chosen by a nomination committee created by the rector – were rejected owing to insufficient representation of women and the humanities, he explains. The final composition agreed upon consistsmainly of academics – plus a student representative, a World Bank director and a board member of Santander Bank.

The fact that Poland has travelled much less far down the authoritarian path than Hungary has is also reflected in academics’ willingness to talk to journalists. Unlike when *THE* visited

Budapest in 2017, no Polish academics looked nervously over their shoulders when being interviewed, and all were happy to go on the record.

Indeed, far from embracing the Polish government's authoritarian identity, Gowin paints himself as a traditional, liberty-loving and pluralistic conservative – he praises Edmund Burke twice – drawing an implicit contrast between himself and his Coalition partners. His reforms even faced criticism from some Law and Justice politicians for being too market-orientated.

"I'm very often accused of being a neoliberal," he says, expanding on his political philosophy. If this is the case, "it is only because I don't like the state. I think that the state should be limited and give as much space as possible to individuals, family, community."

The week before speaking to *THE*, however, the very same Jarosław Gowin sparked opposition horror with his plans to "repolonise" Poland's media if the government wins re-election in October, seeking to take it out of German corporate ownership and place it in Polish-owned hands instead.

Moreover, while many of his reforms may have been defanged, Gowin, a Catholic who was fired from Tusk's cabinet in 2013 over his opposition to gay civil partnerships, abortion and *in vitro* fertilisation, will leave Polish academia with one unambiguous – and highly controversial – legacy, regardless of whether he retains his current position beyond October.

Under his reforms, theology has been elevated from a subsection of the humanities to one of eight overall disciplines, placing it on an equal footing with areas such as economics and the natural sciences. This gives theologians great power on expert advisory boards, which decide which journals or institutions to officially recognise, for example. Critics also claim that the list of approved book publishers drawn up by the ministry as part of the reforms contains some non-academic Catholic imprints.

Even Kulczycki is unconvinced by the wisdom of this. "It's a huge problem, because if you have 21 [council] members, you might have one biologist, one chemist, one mathematician, and three theologians. And they all have equal rights," says Kulczycki, voicing a rare criticism of Gowin's reforms.

Poland's universities may have so far escaped the grip of the state, but the influence of the church may be harder to avoid.

david.matthews@timeshighereducation.com